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| **The Dark Side of Folk: Songs about Murder** |
| (source: emusic.com) |
| Folk music is big on the primal things. Sex. Death. Love. Emotions: both real and chemically self-administered. Hardship. Heaven. When the Harry Smith anthology was re-released it came with a sticker that read "This is Gangsta Folk." A little bit awkward, sure, but worth stressing nonetheless: folk music is alive. It's high-stakes. It's not polite. Most of all, it's full of observations about the world as it has always been and as it is *right now*.  To kick things off, though, here's some of the more grim songs (in no particular order):  "Pretty Polly," performed by **Dock Boggs**:  Beautiful and alien, this song sounds like it's about a million years old. Boggs gives a barebones reading of a common murder-ballad set-up, in which the murderer leads an unsuspecting naïve into the woods and kills and buries her. The combination of this song's stark, spidery banjo lines and Bogg's affectless, almost intentionally ugly voice (I didn't say *bad*, I said ugly) makes it one of the most coldly chilling murder ballads ever.  "Tom Dooley," performed by **Doc Watson**:  The most famous rendition of "Tom Dooley" is the **Kingston Trio**'s excruciatingly cloying whitebread version. Here, flatpicking master Doc Watson, descended from North Carolinans who could still remember **Laura Foster**'s murder and **Tom Dula**'s reputed framing, presents the song with an entirely different melody, brisk and catchy and packed with poetic lyrics like "trouble, oh it's trouble rolling through my breast."  "Duncan and Brady," performed by **Lead Belly**:  The twice-imprisoned Huddie "Lead Belly" Ledbetter presents this story of a criminal murdering a cop with an appropriate lack of sympathy for the former. Nonetheless, he portrays the murderous kingpin Duncan as a chillingly inhuman figure who coldly chides his dying victim for interrupting his card game: "knocking down windows and tearing down doors: now you're lying dead on the...floor." Lead Belly also gets bonus points for performing what is, in my opinion, the definitive version of "Frankie and Albert."  "John Hardy was a Desperate Little Man," performed by the **Carter Family**:  This song is refreshing in its presentation of a murderous criminal not as scary or cool but as small and pitiful. This pretty, catchy little tune mostly follows the cowardly flight of the titular "desperate little man" as he tries to escape punishment for his crimes. John Hardy's murderousness remains inscrutable though, and the Carters retain pity for his death in making him address the crowd: "I've been to the river and I've been baptized, and now I'm on my hanging ground."  "Stagger Lee," performed by **Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds**:  Meanwhile, Nick Cave's modern reading of the ageless "Stagger Lee" is everything the Carters' song *isn't*, a swaggering, raunchy, almost ridiculously malicious vamp that glorifies Stagger Lee as it obscenely embellishes his crimes. I have to admit that this is a pretty disgusting song, but I respect it because it's so toweringly sinister and because Cave captures evil and terror perfectly.  "Delia's Gone," performed by **Johnny Cash**:  Scarier than Nick Cave could ever be, though, is Johnny Cash. The man in black is so committed to the murder-ballad form, in fact, that he dedicated an entire CD of his recent box set to the theme. The harrowing reading of "Delia" that kicked off Cash's 1994 album *American Recordings* - packed with detailed true-crime-quality lines like "I went up to Memphis and I met Delia there. Found her in her parlor and I tied her to her chair" and "First time I shot her I shot her in the side. Hard to watch her suffer, but with the second shot she died" - also kick-started Cash's sagging career back to life.  "I'm in Love with Susan Smith," performed by **Tom House**  Tom House is an almost totally unknown folk musician living in Nashville, TN. His rambling, conversational songs are utterly original while bringing to mind a host of old folk singers as well as contemporary artists like Vic Chesnutt. On his composition "I'm in Love with **Susan Smith**," House resurrects the genre of murder-ballad-as-grassroots-news-editorial to deplore the sanctimonious media while plumbing the murky depths of human attraction and the mystery of insanity, along the way making cryptic statements like "a mother's love is pure and perfect." The song ends with House transported through his own song to what could be the scene of the crime, asking "what is it about today? Is there anything in particular?"  "Henry Lee," performed by **Dick Justice or Jean Ritchie or Nick Cave & P.J. Harvey**:  How refreshing - a song about a *woman* killing a *man*! In Justice's sorrowful and surreal song, a fresh-faced romantic pining for his one true love who lives in a mysterious "merry green land" is "plugged……through and through" by a "little penknife" and dumped unceremoniously into a well by all the ladies of the town, to lie there "'till the flesh drops off [his] bones." Then the song dives deeper into magical realism territory: a bird who witnessed the crime mysteriously tells the murderess "I can't fly down or I won't fly down," and then threatens to "fly away to the merry green land" to report her sin.  "Louis Collins," performed by **Mississippi John Hurt**:  Even when singing about murder, Mississippi John Hurt sounds like a kindly old granddad. Here, he applies his gentle voice and exquisite, elegant fingerpicking to the story of a fatal duel. When Hurt asks "kind friends, oh ain't it hard to see poor Louis in a new graveyard?", we feel fully the poignancy of Hurt's understatement, but when he sings the haunting, calming refrain "angels laid him away, laid him six feet under the clay" we feel comforted.  "Dreadful Wind and Rain," performed by **Jody Stecher**:  "Dreadful Wind and Rain" is the pagan man's "Louis Collins," a haunting, beautiful murder ballad whose doomed victim - in this case a pretty young girl drowned by her jealous sister - is reborn not in heaven but on earth, as a fiddle fashioned by a wandering minstrel from her bones and hair. As sung by Jody Stecher, this gruesome scene is made almost serenely redemptive by the girl's reincarnation as the voice of the fiddle, whose "sound could melt a heart of stone." And the only tune that fiddle would play," Stecher tells us, adding a powerful layer of pre-modern self-reference, "was 'Oh the Dreadful Wind and Rain.'" |